

November 17, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

If Truth Be Told

Exodus 35:21-22; 36:2-7; Mark 10:17

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the Commandments given by God through his servant Moses to his ancient people Israel some 3,000-3,500 years ago as they left slavery in Egypt and were heading on their way to the land God had promised them. As slaves, they didn't know how to live with each other. They had never been responsible for their lives as a community, but now God gives them these ten principles of life by which community life is ordered and shaped, and which shaped their lives and community from that time to this time. These Commandments were embraced by our Lord Jesus Christ, were passed on to the early disciples, recorded in Holy Scripture for us in the 20th chapter of Exodus and the 5th chapter of Deuteronomy and they have been at the foundation of every society that in any way calls itself Christian from that time to this. We come this morning to the Ninth Commandment which tells us that we are not to bear false witness: *You shall not bear false witness.*

Now this Commandment opens up for us a whole can of worms about truth and falsehood in a world in which, paradoxically, many people claim there is no such thing as truth anymore; all truth is relative. Go back even 150 years and you find the German philosopher Nietzsche saying that truth is just an illusion, a series of metaphors which we forget are mere illusions ['On truth and lies in an extra-moral sense,' *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*, p.46-7, Walter Kaufmann transl.]. But today you hear more than anything else that it's "all relative"; that what you perceive as truth is fine from your point of view, but what's truth from your point of view may not be the way I see it or the way it really is. Truth is all from the perspective of the person who is speaking, or the person who is observing. That's what we hear on the one hand in our society, and yet on the other hand we still have this enormous cry in our society for "the truth." For example, we want truth from our government. We want truth from our government agencies. We want truth in our businesses. We want truth in our churches and from our pulpits.

So we've got this cry for truth on the one hand and this doubting that there is truth on a large scale on the other hand, and it all gets confusing very quickly; and I just want to muddy the waters even more by saying that when we think about it, for all of us who would say that we really do believe that there is such a thing as "the truth", and that truth is important, even then, we might also find ourselves saying that there may be times when we have every right to be slow to share the truth, or even, not to share the truth at all!!

Let me give you an example of this to those who are doubters. Think of war time, for example. Think of World War II in particular, and think of the invasion of Europe. Just imagine the Allies getting together and calling up Mr. Hitler and saying “Mr. Hitler, I’m sure you want to know *when* we’re going to invade Europe and *where* we’re going to invade Europe. Let us tell you.” Can you imagine that? Of course not! With a man like Hitler in the midst of war we’d say “No, no, no! Don’t share the truth like that. Keep it a secret. It’s war. It’s a time of exception.” In fact one of the great operations of World War II was *Operation Bodyguard* – an operation which was filled with deceit and lies so that the enemy would never figure out when and where the invasion was going to take place. It was highly successful, and I, for one at least, would say “Great job. You did exactly what you ought to have done in time of war, where the whole issue of who deserves the truth and what we do with the truth is called into question.”

Indeed, when we look at our own world just now and the revelations about the extent of the NSA’s involvement in personal information, – I’d add that for me at least, part of the difficulty in assessing the ‘rightness and wrongness’ of it all has to do with whether or not we think of ourselves as at war or at peace. If, indeed we have a war going on (‘against terror’) then part of the difficulty is that it doesn’t look like any other previous war. So some people say “we cannot afford to share the truth in this situation” and others say “we not at war, we must share the truth in this situation.” Are we at war? Are we at peace? What do we do with the truth when the war/peace issue is murky? It all just gets muddled very quickly – and I acknowledge that in this world in which we live and that’s where I want to start.

But what I also want to say is this. That having said that “on the boundaries there are all these issues between truth and falsehood which are complex and in some ways perhaps unresolvable,” we also know, and I think every one of us knows, that there are situations in daily life that we face, *where we know what God calls us to do, we know what the truth is and we know that we are bound to pursue the truth*, that we ought to do this, and yet we’re still tempted to struggle with the truth and how we handle it. There are times for pursuing, discovering, maintaining, sharing the truth – we must do it in all kinds of different situations – but even then we have to admit there are times when pursuing the truth may still feel a little bit wrong.

One of my favorite old television shows is called *Prime Suspect*. Its main character is a police officer by the name of Jane Tennyson (played by Helen Mirren). And she is determined to pursue the truth, the absolute truth to catch those awful criminals. But she pursues the truth at times in such a way that it gives a bad name to the truth. She pursues it with a brutality which sometimes makes you say “oh that’s cruel, that’s vicious. I wish that this were not the truth.”

There’s one scene in particular in one of the shows in which a teenage boy has just been murdered, and his mother is grieving, and Jane Tennyson believes that the mother knows something about the murder and that she can help with the investigation. So Inspector Tennyson actually gets into the car where the mother is grieving, pouring out tears, and tries to pull from the mother the truth. And a younger officer has to pull her back and say “Not now, not now, not now.”

The truth business is complicated. Whether we're in war, whether we're in peace, how far you pursue it, who is to pursue it, how and when to pursue it.

But it still remains the truth that in many situations in life we know we must. And the temptation is for us not to do it. If you want to see how important this is in daily society, not in cases which are in doubt but in cases in which there is no doubt, let me point you to one web site which speaks about the truth as something which our culture needs to pay attention to.

The website is run by a Princeton grad by the name of David Callahan, and is called www.CheatingCulture.com! I have no clue as to whether David Callahan is a Christian or not, but he certainly believes that our society is being caught up in a web of lies that is harmful to society as a whole. Not just in those things on the fringe of society but in running our daily businesses, we're caught up in a web of lies which we have to expose and free ourselves from if our society is to function well. On the front page of his, home page of his web site he lists all kinds of areas where people have problem with the truth. Here's part of that list. Not all of the list but part of it. He says: we've got the issues of

insider trading, tax evasion, wage theft, pension abuses, debt relief scams, Ponzi schemes, crooked contractors, scientific misconduct, teacher cheating, academic dishonesty, copyright infringement, plagiarism, resume padding

And that's just column one. In the second column he adds all kinds of issues tied in with fraud.

Accounting fraud, foreclosure fraud, mortgage fraud, insurance fraud, procurement fraud, securities fraud, internet ad click fraud. (I don't know what that is but it scares me to death!) *Medicare fraud, Medicaid fraud, workers compensation fraud.*

All of these thrive in our society when people don't pursue the truth, or when they abandon the truth, or play with the truth, or when people think that nobody is watching them as they manipulate the truth. Sometimes this is a problem because of the promise and the allure of financial gain. Frequently that's the case.

We might start on the "low side" with this – with what we might call "petty tax evasion": except that "petty tax evasion" multiplied by all the people who do it amounts to three to four billion dollars of tax evasion in our society every year! When you sign your line on your tax form or somebody does it for you, do we ask, "Is it the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" Well in many cases it's not the truth at all. That's on what I call the low side.

But on the high side you've got all the corporate lying that goes on. Go back a decade or so and you have the Enron and Tyco scandals unfolding before our eyes. Right now you have the Navy contracting scandal (see http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/30/us/scandal-widens-over-contracts-for-navy-work.html?_r=0). And then back a couple of years ago on the business side of things you have got the interest rate fixing scheme with a whole variety of banks. In London for example Barclay's Bank has been involved and the Chairman, the CEO of Barclay's, Robert Diamond (according David Callahan on [www.cheating culture.com](http://www.cheatingculture.com)) apparently spoke and defended his company before the British Parliamentary Committee by

basically saying that *everybody else is doing it, so that if we didn't do it too we'd lose out, therefore we must.*

Try that as a rationale. Well in fact that I think is the rationale that many people give these days. Everybody's doing it, if we don't do it we're going to lose out. Lose out financially: financial gain is a reason for messing with the truth. So is the whole business of appearance before others. Why do we mess with the truth? Well we want to appear before others better than we are.

In 2009 a group called Automatic Data Processing estimated that 46% of all resumé's contained exaggerations or downright lies. Forty six percent! The pressure is on to look good. It's "on" with employers and employees: we want to look good if we're seeking a job. It's also on if young people are looking for colleges and it comes not just from a student's internal desire to get into the best college but often from parents who put extreme pressure on children in order to do well.

In fact, there are some studies coming out which indicate that parental pressure is enormous so that when it comes to cheating on exams it's not just that those at the low end who are trying to get into the game that matters, it's those at the high end who are trying to get into the best colleges in the nation. (See Deborah Jacobs, Forbes Magazine, November 29, 2011 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/deborahljacobs/2011/11/29/why-rich-kids-cheat-on-the-sat/>).

There's a group called the Josephson Center which produces a report on youth ethics every year. In 2012 it estimated that 51% of students cheated on exams, 51%. And 55% admitted that they've lied to a teacher. 55% and 51%. Go back a decade and Rutgers University interviewed thousands of students, some of them from northern Virginia, and they put together quotes from those students about lying and cheating. See, Kathy Slobogin, CNN, April 5, 2002, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/fyi/teachers.ednews/04/05/highschool.cheating/>

Let me share with you a few of these: Here's one: "I actually think cheating is good. A person who has an entirely honest life can't succeed these days." I would guess that that's a very prevalent thought in our society just now. Here's another: "We students know that the fact is that we're almost completely judged by our grades. They're so important that we will sacrifice our own integrity to make a good impression." And one final one: "What's important is getting ahead. The better grades you have the better school you get into. The better you're going to do in life and if you learn to cut corners to do that you're going to be saving yourself time and energy. In the real world that's what's going to be going on. The better you do that's what shows. It's not how moral you were in getting there."

So we lie. We bend the truth. We play with the truth. We do it to look good. We do it to get ahead. We do it to avoid disappointing others. We do it because some of the relationships we have in life are just tough. *Some people emotionally find it very hard to speak the truth.* They're just built that way. It's just hard for some people to speak out when you feel as if the person you're speaking to may not appreciate what you're going to say. There are other people in the world who speak the truth and it's easy and they are often married to each other! And they don't

understand the other people who cannot speak the truth, who cannot get it out of their mouth, who find it hard to speak out when they think they're going to upset somebody. Their rule of life is "be nice no matter what" and the truth takes a much lower place in your life if that's what you're like. But it makes it hard when it comes to God's call to pursue the truth.

Sometimes it's just easier, we say to ourselves, it's just easier to fudge, to be silent, to nod agreement, to go along. On an emotional level, the truth can be hard to tell. But actually it's not just hard for those who find it "emotionally hard" to speak the truth, but it still can be hard to pursue the truth the whole way even for those who have no emotional problem with telling the truth.

Think of the pursuit of truth, for example in the realm of science. Even here, in the realm of science which is based on the premise that the truth can be and must be discovered, pursuing the truth truthfully can be hard. Some people say they will only believe the truth that comes from scientific investigation, but many scientists these days apparently are getting worried that claims of scientific proofs in this that and the next thing are being grossly exaggerated. Some of you may have read *The Economist* magazine four weeks ago (October 19, 2013). They wrote an extended article called "Trouble at the Lab." Among other things the article pointed out that a significant amount of money flows into science to discover what is "new and exciting." And once people think they have found out what is new the money tends to flow somewhere else. The trouble is this that most of science is not exciting, it's boring. It's about doing an experiment, then repeating it and repeating it, replicating it in different places until you are sure that this is something that can in fact be repeated in all kinds of other places. But what *The Economist* was saying was this: that once the initial exciting "discovery" (or hint of discovery) is made, it hits the press. It becomes news; it becomes truth; and then the drudgework of repeating and repeating and repeating needs to follow – but the money that is necessary to do that isn't always there. So even in the scientific community there is this fear that there are an increasing number of "assured results of science" which aren't quite as assured as they claim at first to be.

Whether it's emotionally difficult or whether it just takes perseverance, it can be hard to invest in the truth to pursue the truth and to speak the truth.

Of course none of this is new. It certainly has to do with the 21st century world in which we live, but none of it is new. The Bible is filled with stories of people bending the truth, twisting the truth, playing with the truth and outright lies.

- The first story in the Bible about **Adam and Eve** (Genesis 1-3) is really about truth and falsehood, about God speaking the truth – "eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and you will die"; and the devil saying "Oh that's a lie. Don't listen to that. Eat away! God doesn't mean it. God doesn't speak the truth, does God?" It's about truth and lies.
- The forefather of the Jewish faith, the Christian faith, the Muslim faith, **Abraham** had a hard time speaking the truth. On one occasion he was down in Egypt in front of the King of Egypt (Genesis 12:10-13, see also 20:1-2), the Pharaoh of Egypt who had eyes for his wife Sarah,

for Abraham's wife Sarah. Abraham saw this and he thought "Good grief I'm in trouble here. Let me say something to the King of Egypt to get me out of trouble." You know what he said? He said, "She's not my wife, she's my sister!" Now try that in your marriage. I'm not sure how far you will get with that. They discovered that this wasn't quite the truth. Well it was a half-truth – she was a half-sister. But there's all the world of difference between that half-truth and the whole truth.

- Or the story of **Jacob and Esau** that we shared with the children, about wanting to please, about wanting to get, about wanting to gain, and deceiving even a person whom you love, somebody closest to you. (Genesis 25)
- Or the prophet **Elisha with his servant Gehazi**. Gehazi seeing that a general by the name of Naaman had a ton of money and he didn't care about it and he said I just want a little of that. Nobody will notice and willing to tell a lie in order to get it. (2 Kings 5)

Or we move to the New Testament,

- Here is poor **Simon Peter**, at Jesus' trial. Simon Peter was almost certainly one of those who found it "emotionally hard" to tell the truth – though, to be fair, his life was in great danger at that time. When asked "Are you a friend of this man Jesus?" he said, "No, I've never seen this man in my life before." He couldn't force himself to speak the truth at that moment of fear. We might have been afraid as well, even as Jesus himself was standing before that same crowd, and as one lie after another was told, "bearing false witness" against him, and all leading inexorably to his death.

It's in the face of all this rather bad news, all these complexities, all these fears and emotions, all of these temptations that surround the telling of truth that God still says to his ancient people, and to you and me, "You shall not bear false witness." You shall not do it. And we are left crying out "How Lord? How are we to be people of the truth? How are we to do this?" And I would leave you with three suggestions, well more than suggestions I would say *three truths* to remember, to keep in mind when we are tempted to fudge or twist the truth or tell an outright lie.

The first truth is this: "Your sin" says the book of Numbers (32:23), "will find you out." Think nobody knows? Think again.

Well first of all God knows and God holds us to account. But not only that, business guru Steven Covey says that if in fact you have deceit in the core of your being it will be manifest in all your dealings. It will come out somewhere. Do not think that you can hide it.

If I try to use human influence, strategies and tactics of how to get other people to do what I want while my character is fundamentally flawed and marked by duplicity and insincerity (DR: i.e. by breaking the 9th Commandment) then in the long run I cannot be successful. My duplicity will breed distrust and everything I do will be perceived as manipulative (DR: You cannot hide it. It will come out in one way, shape or form). It simply makes no difference how good the rhetoric is or even how good the intentions are. If there is little or no trust there is no foundation for permanent success. (*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 21)

Get it wrong on the truth level and it will come out – whether to God or to others around about you. Make no mistake about it. Numbers 32 Verse 23: “Your sin will find you out.”

Second truth to remember this: your personal sense of integrity is not worth losing. I know you know that. Maybe not at the moment when you’re tempted, but in your deepest heart – that when you enter into the world of untruth you lose an integrity which surely you want to maintain in your life. It’s not about being perfect, but it’s certainly about being a person we can live with; a person who is honest and true.

Some of you may remember a female athlete who was very famous in the ‘30s, ‘40s and ‘50s her name was Babe Didrikson Zaharias. She was one of the first female professional golfers at the beginning of the lady’s PGA. The story is told (and isn’t this the dilemma with the truth: I’m not sure that I can fully verify the story, but it still makes the point!) that on one occasion she was playing in a PGA competition and she either incurred a two stroke penalty or disqualified herself for playing the wrong ball. She’d hit her ball into the rough. She’d played out of the rough with what she thought was her ball. When she came to play the next shot she realized it wasn’t her ball. She saw it and reported it, and so lost a tournament she otherwise would have won. A friend came up to her afterwards and said why did you do that? Nobody would have known!” To which she said, “I would have known.”

In other words, she didn’t want to live with the person she would have become if she hadn’t told the truth at that moment. Your own sense of personal integrity – bring that into the picture along with the fact that our sins will find us out.

And then, finally the last word is this, and it’s so foundational to our understanding of the gospel and our lives as Christians – that success in life, the best in life is not found by lifting ourselves up above others or pushing other people down, but by pursuing the will of God, by trusting in God. The great truth of the gospel is that our Lord Jesus is a good shepherd (John 10:11) who will never fail us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He will lead us on the best of all possible paths in life for you and me if we hold his hand, no matter where it is or what it involves.

This belief is critical; and we don’t have to mess with, or manipulate, or exaggerate, or abandon the truth to find that path. As the book of Proverbs said years ago (3:5-6), our call is to “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, do not rely on our own insight (or our own manipulations). In all your ways acknowledge God (including his revelation in scripture and in these Commandments), and he will direct our paths.*

That’s his promise and that’s the truth. That’s the truth. You shall not bear false witness.

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